

THE STORY OF A PARISH CHURCH

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The Church Of The Atonement

The Mexican War was six months under way when a group of Episcopalians met on November 11th, 1846, to form a vestry with a view to building a church in the neighborhood of Logan Square, in Philadelphia.

They decided to purchase the lot at the N.E. corner of Schuylkill Avenue (now 17th Street) and Summer Street, from a Mr. Roberts. There was a ground rent of \$100.00 per annum. Mr. Roberts agreed to donate \$500.00 toward the erection of the church. After considering the name "Zion" and "St. Jude", they adopted the name "Church of the Atonement on January 12th, 1847.

The Rev. Kingston Goddard was elected the first Rector on February 2nd, 1847. The architect's plans were approved for \$15,300.00 on March 22nd, 1847. Total expenses were extended to \$20,000.00. Articles of incorporation were recorded March 8th, 1847. On May 31st of the same year, the Building Committee reported that the corner-stone had been laid. The Vestry held a public sale of pews in early March, 1848.

The Church was not slow in recognizing, and endeavoring to meet, its obligations to the community. With \$500.00 donated on June 6th, 1848, by Mr. Wm. Welsh, the Accounting Warden was instructed to buy two pews at \$50.00 each, pay the principal of the annual rental then assessed on them,

and hold them in trust for the use of pupils of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind.

They established a Parish Library in 1850. And on February 5th, 1853, they provided for the appointment of a missionary for the poor in the immediate neighborhood of the church. The Rev. Mr. Bryant, who was elected by the Male Missionary Society for this purpose, was to act also as Assistant to the Rector.

This Vestry had strong ideas on church music, and they took a dim view of choirs. On June 6th, 1848, the Vestry Committee on the Choir condemned the use of secular music in the choir and the use of sections of operatic music. Their aim, they said, was "to secure for the congregation an acceptable and proper Psalmody". They expressed their opposition to any part of the choir being paid. "The worship of God", they insisted, "was too sacred a thing to be entrusted to those who take part in it for the purpose of gain". With the concurrence of the Rector, they reported that it was advisable to keep the choir "as limited as possible" and "to exclude from it all young persons who might, if admitted, make it a lounging place during Divine Service and to discourage, as far as practicable, the visits to it of any but its members".

Despite this gloomy atmosphere, the church at 17th and Summer Streets seems to have indulged in paid singers during practically its whole career. Nevertheless, succeeding choirs were a source of frequent headaches for the early Parish Fathers.

To meet the growing debt the Vestry, on February 8th, 1849, authorized the raising of a mortgage not to exceed \$3,000.00. On December 7th, 1852, the debt having risen to \$8,500.00, the Vestry decided to offer for sale as many of the pews held by the Corporation, at an abatement of 25%, as would yield an amount sufficient to liquidate their obligations. On January 1st,

1853, the committee appointed by a Congregational Meeting, reported to the Vestry that the sale of pews had extinguished the debt, except the ground rent.

The Church of the Atonement was consecrated on March 6th, 1853, by the Rt. Rev. Alonzo Potter, D.D., L.L.D., Bishop of Pennsylvania.

Having cleared the church of debt the Vestry, on June 20th, 1854, proceeded with plans to enlarge the church as soon as \$5,000.00 could be secured. They had, however, a \$4,000.00 organ to pay for. The Vestry, on February 22nd, 1855, adopted a unique plan to accomplish this. They prepared eighty certificates of \$50.00 each. The idea was to dispose of them "to such persons as might be willing to purchase them". The holder of each certificate was to be the owner of 1/80th part of "said organ". Also, "said certificates to be receivable in payment of pews".

The resourcefulness of these early vestrymen indicate that some of them, at least, were business men of no mean ability. For what it may be worth as information, Mr. Anthony J. Drexel was elected a vestryman on February 16th, 1857.

The sale and rental of pews seems to have been a flourishing enterprise all by itself. It needed to be, for it was the principal source of the Parish income. Mention has already been made of public sales for the purpose of extinguishing church indebtedness. On September 8th, 1856, the Vestry decided on a new schedule of prices for new pews resulting from an alteration of the church. The selling prices ranged from \$100.00 to \$400.00, the rental to be 10% of the cost. But no pews were to be rented until enough were sold to realize an amount sufficient to defray the expenses of the alterations to the new part of the church. The choice of pews was determined by auction. One pew - No. 88 - including cushions was, on September 16th, sold to a Captain Ashton for \$500.00 cash.

Pews in those days were like real estate, they could always be taxed when the authorities needed money. On May 18th, 1857, the Vestry levied an assessment of 25% on pew rentals. In this connection, on April 6th, 1858, the salary of the sexton was increased to \$400.00 per annum, "in consideration of the additional service rendered by him in collecting pew rents".

The Rev. Kingston Goddard tendered his resignation on May 2nd, 1859, to take effect June 1st following. The Vestry voted to hand him a gift on leaving of \$500.00.

The Rev. Benjamin Watson, of St. Luke's Church, Rochester, was elected to the Rectorship on July 5th, 1859.

In 1865, the Vestry again turned to the pew-renters as a convenient source of increased revenue to meet the high cost of operation. On January 16th, they ordered pew rents to be advanced 30%. And on May 13th, 1867, they authorized the Accounting Warden to employ a suitable person to collect pew rents, at a commission of 5%.

In matters ecclesiastical the church fathers did not hesitate to speak out when their sense of propriety was outraged. On May 29th, 1874, they passed a resolution which condemned the use of the name of the Atonement in connection with the "so-called Reformed Episcopal Church". After stating flatly that the Vestry was opposed to the movement, the resolution continued: "the so-called reform movement is injudicious and unwise and founded chiefly in ignorance or misapprehension of the meaning of words about which there has not been, until recently, any question in the Church".

It can be seen easily that when pew rents slumped it could be a calamity. At a vestry meeting on October 30th, 1876, it was brought out that this income had fallen off from \$7,200.00 per annum in 1872, to an estimated

\$4,800.00 in the current year. The Rector offered to take a cut in his salary from \$3,500.00 to \$2,500.00. Despite this decline, the Church still felt that it could afford to pay its choir. On March 4th, 1878, the salaries were fixed at: soprano, \$200.00 per annum; contralto, \$100.00; bass, \$100.00; tenor, \$100.00; organ-blower, \$50.00.

On March 7th, 1881, Dr. Watson accepted another cut of \$1,000.00 in his salary. On July 18th, 1883, the officers of the Corporation were empowered to make a loan of \$5,000.00 for a period of not less than three years, interest not to exceed 6%, to be secured by mortgage, etc.

On October 15th, 1883, it was pointed out that alterations and repairs totaled about \$7,700.00, which was about \$3,000.00 in excess of the amount obtained by mortgage.

It may be that the persistent struggle to keep abreast of the high cost of running a church had resulted in an acute case of bad temper. At any rate, on January 17th, 1885, considerable heat was engendered during the meeting of the Vestry over the choir. A resolution was adopted stating that the music was discreditable and not in keeping with the dignity of the church. It was recommended that the Music Committee get other singers, or another organist, or both. They finally calmed down and returned the report to the Music Committee "with the request that said committee endeavor to improve the character of the music, according to their best judgement".

To help the men overcome the deficiency in funds, the Ladies Aid Society, on February 20th, 1888, proposed to solicit pledges to an amount sufficient to pay the accrued matured obligations (about \$1,400.00), such pledges to be redeemed at the Easter Offertory. The Vestry accepted the proposal with a resolution of thanks.

Dr. Watson tendered his resignation as Rector on January 25th, 1892, to take effect February 1st, 1892. The Vestry, in accepting his resignation, elected him Rector Emeritus.

On May 30th, 1892, the Vestry approved a motion to prepare a report to the congregation that \$3,000.00 must be raised.

A resolution was adopted on November 18th, 1892, offering the position of Minister-in-Charge to the Rev. I. Newton Stanger, D.D. Dr. Stanger's acceptance was made effective November 1st, 1892. He was elected Rector June 12th, 1893.

The union of the Church of the Atonement with St. Paul's Church, West Philadelphia, was foreshadowed on October 28th, 1895. On that date the Vestry adopted a resolution "to arrange, if possible, with the ecclesiastical authorities for the Church of the Atonement to assume charge of the services of St. Paul's Mission, at 47th Street and Kingsessing Avenue, with the understanding that the expenses of the Mission shall be provided for by the Mission".

The Vestry broke the news to the congregation on June 6th, 1896, in a letter addressed "to the Parishioners and Supporters of the Church of the Atonement", which clearly reflected the prevailing sadness at the passing of the old church. It was to the effect that the once strong congregation had been so decimated by deaths and removals, that the current income was wholly insufficient to enable the Vestry to seek the services of a clergyman who could "rebuild the waste places". The letter informed the congregation that they were moving to 47th Street and Kingsessing Avenue.

During the years, several attempts at union with other churches had been made and failed. On March 5th, 1855, a communication was received inviting the Church of the Atonement to unite with certain persons to erect a Protestant Episcopal Church at the corner of 15th and Arch Streets. The Rev. Kingston

Goddard was to be Rector of the combined churches. The Atonement Vestry replied that there existed no legal authority under which they could take action.

February 17th, 1862, a union with St. Barnabas Church was proposed by the Rector, Dr. Watson. The views of the Vestry were unfavorable due to the financial questions involved.

On April 15th, 1879, the Vestry approved a committee report regarding a consolidation with the Church of the Covenant. The plan hinged upon the success in raising \$25,000.00 in addition to the sale of the two properties. Nothing came of this.

On March 7th, 1884, a committee was appointed to discuss consolidation with a committee from Grace Church. They considered building a new church. Action was postponed. The proposal was again brought up April 16th, 1895, when a letter dated February 16th, 1895, from Grace Church was discussed. This plan collapsed also.

April 16th, 1895, a committee was appointed to meet with a committee from the Church of the Epiphany. The Epiphany acknowledged the "offer" of the Atonement on May 20th. Dr. Stanger wrote the Vestry about meeting committees from other churches, with a view to a union with one of them.

On December 2nd, 1895, a resolution accepting a conditional proposal of the Church of the Epiphany was passed. The proposal was to purchase the Atonement's property at 17th and Summer Streets for \$35,000.00, subject to the existing ground rent of \$600.00 per annum. It was understood that the Great Organ, choir stalls and memorials, be preserved. The Bishop and Standing Committee were notified of this offer of the Epiphany, who agreed to continue the services at 17th and Summer Streets, and to maintain a pastoral

oversight of the neighborhood, provided the Ecclesiastical Authorities would permit them to locate their parish church at 18th and Chestnut Streets.

The Atonement desired, the notification pointed out, to use the proceeds of the sale of the property at 17th and Summer Streets toward the building of a new church at 47th Street and Kingsessing Avenue.

In a letter of January 15th, 1896, to the Church of the Epiphany, the Atonement Vestry stated that they had a congregation with an average attendance of 200; average "communion" of 100; a pew rental of about \$2,100.00; an offertory for church expenses of about \$1,000.00; for other objects, about \$1,700.00; and an organized Sunday School of about 200 scholars. It is easy to understand the reluctance of the Atonement authorities to pack up and go over to West Philadelphia without providing for the future needs of a congregation which, at this distance, looks fairly healthy.

Negotiations with the Church of the Epiphany seems to have had rough going for awhile. On April 14th, 1896, a motion was approved to sell the church property for the best price obtainable. The Vestry had already notified the Diocesan authorities (December 2nd, 1895) that unless some satisfactory arrangement could be made, the Atonement would have to abandon the work entirely, if not give up their corporate existence.

In a written statement on May 25th, 1896, Dr. Stanger agreed to surrender his stated salary as Rector until the Corporation was transferred to 47th Street and Kingsessing Avenue, provided that if the Corporation should "fall heir" to a revenue sufficient for him to continue his work in the old church "the aforesaid agreement will not stand".

Though the minutes do not give intermediate details, negotiations with the Church of the Epiphany were resumed. On May 21st, 1898, the Vestry

adopted a resolution calling for a Congregational Meeting of the Church of the Atonement to vote on a resolution to "sell to the Rector, Church Wardens and Vestrymen of the Church of St.Luke and the Epiphany, the church property situate at the northeast corner of Seventeenth and Summer Streets, for the price of fifty-five hundred dollars cash, under and subject to the ground rent of six hundred dollars a year, and the arrears thereon. And the Rector and Church Wardens are authorized to execute such deeds as are necessary to convey a fee simple title thereof". It would appear that the negotiations with Epiphany were held up because of their indicated union with St.Luke.

May 31st, 1898, a Congregational Meeting unanimously adopted the foregoing resolution. Another resolution was adopted that the disposition of any of the church property not included in the sale to the Church of St.Luke and the Epiphany be left to the Rector and Church Wardens.

The old church building of the Atonement became known as "The Epiphany Chapel". The Church of St.Luke and the Epiphany sold this building in 1946 to an Albanian Orthodox Congregation.

#### The Divinity School Mission and St.Paul's Church

The Church of the Atonement was united by court decree with St.Paul's Church, 47th Street and Kingsessing Avenue, on April 2nd, 1900. St.Paul's was then ten years old. During that decade, the Divinity School Mission had grown to the status of an incorporated church. Here was an ambitious youngster struggling with its growing pains. Across the Schuylkill, in Old Philadelphia, was an oldster equally ambitious but which, through five decades of labor, had drained all the sustenance from the old soil. The Church of the Atonement desperately needed a new field.

St. Paul's Church grew out of the Divinity School Mission. The first services of the Mission were held in the Divinity School Chapel, which was then located at 50th Street and Woodland Avenue, in West Philadelphia, on the last Sunday in October, 1887. An undated appeal from the Finance Committee for funds, which was probably issued about 1895, had this to say: "In the Spring of 1887, this section of the city suddenly entered upon the phenomenal growth which has so completely changed its character and appearance. At that time, there was no place of public worship of any denomination in the region between 42nd Street and Baltimore Avenue, and 70th Street and Woodland Avenue. The rapid access of population created a need for a new church enterprise. The need was provided by the Divinity School, with the approval of the Diocesan Authorities and the written consent of the rectors of the three nearest parishes".

The Rev. E. T. Bartlett, D. D. Dean of the Divinity School threw open the Mission chapel to the people of the neighborhood in 1888. The congregation grew from 50 on May 1st, 1889, to 238 on May 1st, 1895. "From October, 1887, to June, 1890, Dean Bartlett served as Minister-in-Charge, without stipend. From June, 1889, to June, 1890, the salaries of lay readers and of a Deacon Assistant were provided for by subscriptions from friends not connected with the congregation."

In 1891, the Rev. L. W. Batten was appointed Minister-in-Charge by the Bishop. On June 3rd, 1891, the Bishop gave his canonical consent to erect suitable buildings for the Mission at the corner of 47th Street and Kingsessing Avenue. The property was placed under the control of a Board of Trustees. On this Board, Mr. E. P. Allinson represented the congregation; W. W. Frazier, Esq. the Bishop; and Dean Bartlett, the faculty of the Divinity School.

On June 21st, 1892, a Congregational Meeting approved Dean Bartlett's suggestion that the new chapel be named "St. Paul's, West Philadelphia".

The corner-stone of the Parish House was laid on Saturday, November 12th, 1892, at 4:00 P.M. Church services were held in this building until the church edifice was completed in 1901.

Mr. Batten resigned as Minister-in-Charge of St. Paul's Chapel on February 24th, 1893. Bishop O.W. Whitaker appointed the Rev. James Alan Montgomery, on April 24th, 1893, to the vacancy.

The Bishop dedicated the new Parish House on October 7th, 1893.

The first recorded step toward a consolidation with the Church of the Atonement was taken by St. Paul's when, on November 27th, 1893, the Advisory Committee met at the residence of Bishop Whitaker to consult about the selection of a new Rector. The Bishop informed the Committee that the Rev. Dr. Stanger of the Church of the Atonement would probably consent to act as Rector, if called. He would preach at the two churches on alternate Sundays, appointing an acceptable substitute during the interim.

It will be remembered that at that time the Church of the Atonement was negotiating for a sale of its property to the Church of the Epiphany. The proceeds of the sale - which it was hoped would be around \$35,000.00 - was to be used in building a new church at 47th Street and Kingsessing Avenue.

The Advisory Committee elected Dr. Stanger to be Rector of St. Paul's on December 7th, 1895. The Bishop appointed him Rector-in-Charge in 1896.

The record would not be complete if no emphasis were placed on the support given by the Ladies Aid Society toward the development of a community church, at this time. On April 19th, 1897 (Easter Monday), the Secretary reported a membership of 47. The report continued: "the range of its labors

has secured cushions for the pews, carpets for the aisles, new rooms, and fencing". Beside this, they had paid rent, furnished coal, and helped to bury, "in some cases of severe distress". The report added that they had prepared a quantity of "made-up" sewing material, and furnished an occasional box to "struggling missionaries".

On March 31st, 1899, the Advisory Committee passed a resolution addressed to the Bishop of the Diocese, the Trustees of the Property, and the Trustees and Board of Overseers of the Divinity School, requesting that they be permitted to become an incorporated parish. They also requested that the title to the property be transferred to the Diocesan authorities.

The first meeting of the incorporators was held on September 19th, 1899. Mr. Finletter, a member of the Advisory Committee, presented the charter of the Corporation. Mr. E. C. Buzby was elected the first permanent secretary.

On November 23rd, 1899, a special meeting of the Vestry was called on a proposal by the Bishop that St. Paul's merge with the Church of the Atonement, providing a church should be built on the property in memory of Dr. Benjamin Watson, the late Rector Emeritus. The bishop was to collect the money necessary and to build the church. The title of the new corporation would be: "The Church of the Atonement, Memorial to the Rev. Benjamin Watson, D.D."

A resolution to effect this merger was passed unanimously. It provided that: "In case of the dissolution of the consolidated corporation, all the property of the same shall vest in the Trustees of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Pennsylvania, in trust for the purposes mentioned in Article Second hereof, to be used and applied by the Trustees in such manner as they shall direct." Article Second provided that the purpose of the Church was for the support of the public worship, etc., according to

the "faith and discipline" of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America.

The merger was approved by a Congregational Meeting on February 5th, 1900.

The Church of the Atonement, Memorial to the Rev. Benjamin Watson, D.D.

The consolidation of the two churches was effected on April 2nd, 1900, by order of the Court.

Meanwhile, construction of the new church structure had been progressing. On May 11th, 1901, a special meeting of the Vestry was held for the purpose of making the necessary arrangements for the consecration of the Church of the Atonement on the following day, Sunday, May 12th, 1901. A formal application to the Bishop for the consecration was drawn up, signed by the Rector and the Secretary of the Vestry, and sealed. A check for \$1,200.00 was received from Mr. W. W. Frazier which, with the pledged subscriptions, more than wiped out the indebtedness in building. Mr. Frazier, however, made an important reservation. He did not remit the original ground rent of \$10,500.00. But he did agree to remit \$1,000.00 for every \$1,000.00 paid up by the congregation. So, the principal and interest were reduced at the same time. Mr. Frazier felt that, in this way, he was leaving something for the Church to strive for.

The first services were held in the new structure on Easter Sunday, April 7th, 1901. It was consecrated on May 12th, 1901, by the Rt. Rev. O. W. Whitaker, D.D., Bishop of Pennsylvania.

On February 17th, 1903, Mr. Finletter presented to the Vestry the deed of the Trustees of the Church, Grounds and Buildings, and the release of the ground on which the church building stood, from the lien of the mortgage.

A resolution was then adopted authorizing "the proper officers of the Corporation ..... to make, sign and seal, and deliver a conveyance to the Diocesan Trustees, of the Church and the ground on which the Church stands".

The men of the Parish took an active part in the social and missionary work from the beginning of the consolidation. The first meeting of the Men's Parish Association was held on December 2nd, 1901, with 20 members present. Their object was the promotion of educational and philanthropic work within the bounds of the Parish. Social features and entertaining talks from friends and members were included in the program.

It was to be expected that the expenses of the young church would outrun its income. On April 19th, 1909, Mr. William M. Irish, who had been elected to the Vestry on February 10th, 1908, came up with a unique idea for doing something about an estimated deficit of \$963.06. His plan was to assess all organizations using the Parish House, 10% of their gross receipts, to be paid quarterly, and to be used exclusively for the maintenance and improvement of that building. The motion carried. No mention is made in the minutes as to what the organizations thought about the scheme, nor how long it was in effect.

On March 12th, 1911, the Vestry retained the Rev. Chas. W. Shriener, as an assistant for one year, at \$1,000.00 per annum. One-half of his compensation was to be paid by Dr. Stanger, the other half was to be raised by the congregation. This amicable arrangement was not to be realized. Nineteen days later, on March 31st, 1911, Dr. Stanger died. On February 14th, 1912, a call as Rector was extended to Mr. Shriener.

The Parish acquired its present rectory on June 6th, 1913, when the residence of Mrs. Stanger, at 4708 Kingsessing Avenue, was transferred to the Parish. On February 14th, 1916, the Rector produced the deed and title

pepers to the rectory. The Women of the Parish had presented "the clear deed and title to the rectory at 4708 Kingsessing Avenue. The purchase price of \$5,000.00 had been paid, with interest and taxes". The women of the Parish stated their intention to "maintain the rectory in taxes and ordinary repairs as part of their work in the life of the Parish".

The shadow of the First World War hung over the Vestry when, on April 9th, 1917, they approved a resolution to relieve Mr. Shriener "if duty calls, as he sees fit, and that we support him financially."

On April 1st, 1918, Mr. Shriener resigned as Rector, to take effect September 1st, 1918, in order to take charge of the Church Farm School.

On August 5th, 1918, the Rev. James M. Collins, of St. Paul's Church, Lansing, Mich. was elected to the Rectorship.

The first step to do away with the sale and rental of pews was taken on June 9th, 1919, when the Vestry accepted a report of the Finance Committee that a system of pledges based on a percentage of income, be adopted. The motion to submit the plan to the congregation was passed. The plan to install a Free Pew system was adopted on October 13th, 1919. The Rector was authorized to employ a suitable person to take over the envelope work, which had been handled by members of the Vestry. The budget for 1920 shows an item of \$300.00 for the salary of a Parish Secretary.

Mr. Collins resigned on November 25th, 1941, effective January 31st, 1942, to become Superintendent of the Protestant Episcopal City Mission.

The Vestry elected the Rev. Alexander M. Rodger, of Wilkes Barre, as Rector, on May 5th, 1942.

On April 26th, 1943, the Rector appointed the eight vestrymen as team captains for the solicitation of \$1,600.00, to pay off the mortgage on

the rectory. On October 11th, 1943, Mr. Rodger reported to the Vestry that they had raised \$1,625.00.

Mr. Rodger submitted his resignation as Rector on October 10th, 1944, effective November 30th. The Rev. Leonard B. Rasmusson, of Warren, R.I. was elected Rector on November 15th, 1944.

On January 28th, 1949, the Vestry authorized the selection of an auxiliary Vestry of six men, to sit with the regularly elected vestry, but to have no voting privilege.

Mr. Rasmusson resigned as Rector on June 19th, 1951, effective August 15th, 1951. The Vestry elected the Rev. Thomas A. Meryweather, of the Church of the Advocate, Philadelphia, to the Rectorship on July 1st, 1951, effective October 1st, 1951.

Mr. Meryweather brought into the Parish the invigorating influence of a company commander of the First World War. Immediate steps were taken to rehabilitate the church property and promote a more healthy interest in Parish life. At the Congregational Meeting on Easter Monday, April 14th, 1952, the Chairman of the Property Committee, Mr. Jos. A. Wallace, presented a long-range plan for repairs to the buildings and organ. The overall cost of \$7,620.00 was to be spread over a period of three years. At the close of 1952, the quota for that year had been subscribed. The organ had been regenerated, other minor repairs completed or advanced.

On the human side, the parishioners were imbued with a new spirit. Old organizations were revivified with new ideas. An increased enthusiasm in the social life was apparent. Young men were encouraged to serve the altar as acolytes. A lay reader was appointed.

The sixtieth anniversary of the laying of the corner-stone of the Parish House was celebrated on Sunday evening, November 9th, 1952, with a Choral Evensong. The service was conducted by a large delegation of students from the Philadelphia Divinity School. The Very Rev. Frank D. Gifford, Ph.D., Dean of the Divinity School, preached the sermon. This was particularly appropriate since Dean Gifford's predecessor, Dr. E. T. Bartlett, made the institution of St. Paul's Parish possible.

Through one hundred and five years, the Church of the Atonement has survived wars - six of them - economic stresses, deaths and removals of important leaders, and the ceaseless flow of humanity into the Parish and outward again toward less congested areas. There is nothing static about a Parish. Yet, the Church of the Atonement hopes to remain where it has been rooted for sixty years, ministering to the needs of an ever-changing community; for a long time to come.

November 18th, 1952.

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